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A JONAH MONUMENT IN THE NEW YORK
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

THERE is an interesting monument in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts, the true character of which has not been correctly identified. It is displayed on the ground floor of the Museum, immediately to the right of the entrance. It is a piece of sculpture in white marble, about 2 feet long, and 1 foot 8 inches high. It represents a ship containing four men; three of them are naked, and are engaged in letting down another naked man into the jaws of a conventional sea dragon. The dragon is a second time represented casting forth the man upon the shore.

Both the front and back views of this monument are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. It will be seen that the hull of the ship is completely finished in the round, whereas the human figures upon it are executed neither altogether in the round nor merely in relief, but half-way between the two. They are evidently not meant to be seen from behind; and the sail, we must suppose, was only finished in front. The dragon and its victim are, in both cases, executed in relief.

The monument is much damaged; the sail is gone, together with the upper parts of the men on deck and the roof of the cabin on the poop. The lower part of the stone is cut in the shape of a pedestal; but this work is evidently recent, and it therefore affords no indication of the use to which this sculpture was originally put. From the character of the fracture at the back, it appears as if it had formed part of a larger monument, though it is difficult to conjecture what ornamental purpose it may have served.

This monument furnishes an interesting illustration of ancient ship-building. The ship is girded from stem to stern; and at the stern it has, in addition, an under-girding. Such a girding of wood was commonly employed in ancient ship-building, and it cannot be taken to indicate stress of storm and shipwreck such as would require under-girding with cables. The only sign of storm which can be detected is the extreme elevation



FIGURE 1. — A JONAH MONUMENT IN NEW YORK: FRONT.

of the stern—to judge from the slant of the cabin table. No oars are represented, though a row of oar-locks is carefully executed; a single rudder projects near the stern. The interior of the cabin was carved with curious care; the round table, in the centre, is cut free on all sides, and the difficulty of the execution will be apparent when it is remarked that the opening on the side was originally not so large, but was divided by two thin walls into three narrow slits. The three sailors, as well as the man who is being cast into the sea, are

naked; the helmsman or master, who stands near the stern, was evidently clothed, though nothing is left of him save the lower part of his garment, and that is somewhat confused with the wall of the cabin.

This monument, as it stands in the Museum, is described by a card, as follows: "Votive ship. Graeco-Roman. Found at



FIGURE 2. — A JONAH MONUMENT IN NEW YORK: REAR.

ancient Tarsus, 1876. Presented to the Museum, 1877, by John Todd Edgar, Late U. S. Consul at Beirût."

The simple designation, "votive ship," seems to express the notion that the monument represents a shipwreck, and was erected out of gratitude for deliverance. If this is the interpretation, it is manifestly far-fetched. It would be a fantastic stretch of symbolism to represent the dangers of the sea in terms of a dragon which swallows a man and casts him forth again upon the land. We have seen that there is no sign of

wreck about the ship, and no very clear indication of storm. It is clear, on the contrary, that the man is intentionally thrown overboard by his comrades.

There is no need to puzzle over the interpretation of this subject, for any one who is at all acquainted with early Christian art will recognize it at once as a representation of the story of Jonah — a theme which was more popular than any other during the third and fourth centuries, and which was always depicted substantially in the same fashion as here. It is found about forty times among the frescos of the Roman catacombs, and it occurs several times upon the sarcophagi of the fourth century, although it was a theme which could not readily be depicted in sculpture.¹

The subject would, no doubt, have been recognized at once, were it not for the strange sea monster which is here found in the place of the familiar whale. The story in the Hebrew calls the creature simply a monster, without designating more particularly its character. In early Christian art the monster was invariably represented by the figure of a fabulous sea dragon with capacious jaws and terrible teeth, usually with fore legs, and always with a serpentine tail writhed in massive convolutions. This creature had its obvious prototype in classic art, — in representations of Perseus and Andromeda, etc. It was first called a whale² in an early Latin version, perhaps in the fourth century; but this interpretation had no influence at all upon art during the whole of the early period, and the non-descript monster held its place unchallenged until the Middle Ages, when it was replaced, not by the whale, but by a great fish.

We have, in this monument, two successive episodes of Jonah's story combined in one picture, — an economy of *mis*

¹ Most of the frescos are yet unpublished, but a number of characteristic examples are to be found among the plates of De Rossi's *Roma Sotterranea* — or, indeed, with any book which deals with early Christian art. The best representation of this theme in sculpture is on a sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum.

² *Cetus* — but even this word may denote an indeterminate monster.

en scene which was common in early Christian art, particularly in Bible miniatures. In the frescos, however, these two episodes were usually treated separately and framed apart. The story was commonly completed by another picture, which represented Jonah lying naked in the shade of the gourd. When, on account of lack of space, the series had to be abbreviated by the omission of any of the scenes, it was usually the scene with the gourd which was retained. This, though the least dramatic of the three subjects, evidently constituted the point of the story. And this apparently strange preference is explained by the fact that the story was depicted in Christian art solely with a symbolic or allegorical interest, as a representation of the resurrection; Jonah, lying naked under the gourd, represented the soul delivered from death and in the enjoyment of the bliss of paradise. Jonah's nakedness under the gourd is significant, because it is not by any means to be derived from the story itself. Jonah's posture under the gourd seems to have been inspired by the representations of Endymion in classic art; his nakedness is evidently meant to signify idyllic repose in paradise; the original prophetic lesson of the gourd is ignored (it is only once represented as withered), and it is taken to represent the heavenly garden. In our monument, Jonah, as he issues from the monster, holds his hands in the early Christian attitude of prayer. This may have been meant to suggest the prayer which he offered in the belly of the monster; but this posture was also characteristic of the *orans*,—the early Christian symbol which represented the soul, after death, supplicating the mercy of God,—and there can be no doubt that this signification was here expressly intended.

To understand the popularity of the pictures of Jonah in early Christian art, and to comprehend the sepulchral symbolism which they expressed, it is necessary to consider this theme in its relation to a whole range of Old and New Testament subjects which were taken as examples of signal deliverance. Several of these subjects are sometimes conjoined in

art, and almost the whole list is several times enumerated in literature. The classical example is a passage in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (Book V, 7): "He who raised Lazarus on the fourth day and the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow, and rose also himself; who after three days brought forth Jonah living and unharmed from the belly of the whale, and the Three Children from the furnace of Babylon, and Daniel from the mouth of the lions, shall not lack power to raise us also. He who raised the paralytic, and healed him who had the withered hand, and restored the lacking faculty to him who was born blind, the same shall raise us also." The Roman Breviary (in the *Ordo commendationis animae*) contains a still more complete enumeration, couched in the terms of a litany. Each petition is in this form:

"Deliver, O Lord, his soul as thou didst deliver Daniel from the den of lions."

Here, however, Jonah and Lazarus are omitted,—evidently because they were most expressly types of the resurrection, whereas the prayer is for deliverance from bodily death. In the *Acta Sanctorum*, petitions of the same character are several times put in the mouths of martyrs at the moment of death. This reveals a type of thought which was very familiar in the early Church, and it sufficiently explains the predilection for pictures of Jonah.

The story of Jonah was especially appropriated to sepulchral decoration, and we may suppose that our monument formed part of the decoration of a tomb. It may, however, have been a votive monument, erected for the repose of a soul. In either case—whether it served for the adornment of a tomb or of a chapel—it is difficult to conceive just how it may have been employed.

The style of the figures is rude; it is probable that the monument belongs to the fourth century, though it may, conceivably, be as late as the fifth.

The interest of this monument does not consist solely in the fact that it is the only antique representation of the subject in

America. It has a special interest as coming from Tarsus, the birthplace of St. Paul, and as the earliest representation of Jonah which has yet been found in the Orient—so far as my knowledge goes. Beside this, it is one of the few examples we know of early Christian sculpture in the round, and the only one of the sort on which Jonah figures. It is unique in another sense, for it is the only monument of early Christian art which shows so curious a combination of sculpture in the round and in relief. As a minor point, it may be remarked that it is the only case in which Jonah is represented descending feet foremost into the jaws of the monster—though he always comes out head first.

WALTER LOWRIE.